ASEAN-UK SAGE OOSCY Thematic Research Report

Mapping Systemic and Community-Level Challenges and Scalable Inclusion Practices for Out-of-School Children and Youth (OOSCY) with Disabilities in Southeast Asia

SEAMEO Regional Centre for Special Educational Needs (SEAMEO SEN)
Heikhal Hamzah & Mizanina Madon
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Abbreviations and Acronyms

ALS	Alternative Learning System (Philippines)
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
DPO	Disabled Persons' Organisation
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
IEP	Individualised Education Plan
ILRC	Inclusive Learning Resource Centre
KII	Key Informant Interview
LGU	Local Government Unit
MoE	Ministry of Education
OOSCY	Out-of-School Children and Youth
OT	Occupational Therapist
PPKI	Programme Pendidikan Khas Integrasi (Integrated Special Education Programme, Malaysia)
RA 11650	Republic Act 11650 — Inclusive Education Act (Philippines)
RPI	Rancangan Pendidikan Individu (Individual Education Plan, Malaysia)
SEAMEO SEN	Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Centre for Special Educational Needs
SKM	Sijil Kemahiran Malaysia (Malaysian Skills Certificate)
SPED	Special Education
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UDL	Universal Design for Learning
UNCRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund

Executive Summary

This thematic study examines systemic and community-level barriers that prevent out-of-school children and youth (OOSCY) with disabilities from accessing or re-entering education in three Southeast Asian countries, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines and identifies scalable inclusion practices that support their reintegration. The study was conducted by SEAMEO Regional Centre for Special Educational Needs (SEAMEO SEN) as part of the ASEAN-UK Supporting the Advancement of Girls' Education (SAGE) Programme.

The study adopted a mixed-methods, multiple case study design. Data were collected through: a document and policy review; a School Accessibility Checklist Survey administered to 125 participants with 84 completed responses received (67.2% response rate); and six key informant interviews (KIIs) with special education teachers from Malaysia (n=2), Thailand (n=2), and the Philippines (n=2). Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) originally planned in the study design could not be conducted due to logistical and institutional constraints, a limitation acknowledged throughout this report.

Key Findings

Barriers to Education Access: Findings reveal that out-of-school status among children with disabilities results from the intersection of multiple, mutually reinforcing barriers operating across ecological levels. Economic pressure, family instability, and student disengagement were the most commonly cited micro-level barriers across all three countries. At the meso-level, weak home-school communication and insufficient parental capacity to support schooling were prominent. At the exo- and macro-levels, inadequate teacher preparedness, shortage of support personnel, inaccessible infrastructure, and fragmented policy implementation compound the challenges.

School Accessibility Survey (n=84): Five overarching themes emerged from the survey: (1) a Policy–Practice Gap, where strong national commitments are unevenly implemented at school level; (2) a Rural–Urban Divide, where location significantly shapes access to resources and support; (3) Poverty and Transport as the highest barriers to participation; (4) a tension between Teacher Readiness and System Readiness, with teacher willingness undermined by inadequate systemic support; and (5) Institutional Capacity as the weakest link, with administrative re-entry systems for OOSCY remaining underdeveloped across all three countries.

Scalable Inclusion Practices: Despite these challenges, educators across all three countries have developed effective, low-cost, and contextually grounded strategies to improve retention and facilitate re-entry. These include Ziarah Cakna and Yeam Ban structured home visitation programmes, peer mentoring (Guru Muda), school-based livelihood projects, token economy systems, Child Find community outreach, the ALS-SNED pathway for learners with disabilities (Philippines), and Community Learning Centres (Thailand).

Teacher Agency vs System Readiness: A consistent cross-country pattern is that positive outcomes for students with disabilities are disproportionately driven by individual teacher initiative rather than systemic support. While teacher attitudes and creativity are critical enablers, the heavy reliance on individual educators reflects a gap in institutional and policy-level support that must be addressed for sustainable change at scale.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the convergent findings from the survey and KIIs, this study presents five strategic recommendations: (1) Strengthen Institutional Capacity — improve district-level support, funding, and monitoring systems; (2) Formalise OOSCY Re-entry Systems — establish structured case conferencing and bridging pathways; (3) Shift from Stand-Alone Training to System-Supported Implementation — pair professional development with assistive resources and enabling structures; (4) Reduce Rural–Urban Inequality — target rural grants, transport subsidies, and mobile support teams; and (5) Address Poverty–Transport Barriers — integrate inclusive education with social protection schemes. Key stakeholders include Ministries of Education, District and Provincial Education Offices, Social Welfare and Transport Agencies, School Leaders and Teachers, NGOs, DPOs, and Local Government Units.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background and Rationale

Across Southeast Asia, social, economic, and demographic transformations continue to shape access to education and the quality of learning opportunities available to children and youth. While sustained economic growth and expanded school enrolment have been recorded across the region, these advances have not benefitted all population groups equally. The effects of poverty, social exclusion, and systemic barriers remain pronounced, particularly for children and youth with disabilities. The disruptions associated with the Covid-19 pandemic have further exacerbated these challenges, increasing the risk of dropout and prolonged disengagement from education.

Within this context, out-of-school children and youth (OOSCY) with disabilities represent one of the most persistently marginalised groups globally. Only 54% of children with disabilities complete primary education, compared to 73% of their non-disabled peers (UNESCO, 2020). In the East Asia and Pacific region, children with disabilities are 49% more likely to have never attended school (UNICEF, 2021). Despite the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) by most ASEAN Member States and the adoption of inclusive education policies, many children and youth with disabilities continue to experience limited access to schooling.

Educational exclusion is rarely attributable to physical barriers alone; rather, it reflects the interaction of persistent stigma, deficit-oriented perceptions of disability, rigid curriculum structures, limited teacher preparedness, and fragmented policy implementation across education, health, and social welfare sectors.

Several regional and national efforts have sought to address OOSCY in Southeast Asia. These include Malaysia's Zero-Reject Policy, Thailand's community-based rehabilitation programmes, and the Philippines' alternative education pathways. However, much of the existing evidence focuses on general OOSCY populations, with limited attention to the specific experiences of children and youth with disabilities, particularly those who have dropped out or face significant barriers to re-entry. Moreover, many promising interventions remain localised and insufficiently documented, limiting their potential for adaptation and scale.

This study directly addresses this policy and evidence gap. The persistence of educational exclusion among children with disabilities, despite strong legal frameworks across the three study countries, intended to reveal a disconnect between policy commitment and implementation reality. Understanding and bridging this gap requires disability-specific, contextually grounded evidence that maps not only barriers but also effective practices that are already working in classrooms and communities across the region.

The study aligns with and contributes to several regional policy frameworks. It supports the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Education for Out-of-School Children and Youth (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016), which calls for systematic efforts to identify and address the barriers facing the most marginalised OOSCY populations. It contributes to SEAMEO's Education Agenda, particularly its priorities of addressing barriers to inclusion, promoting system resilience, and advancing evidence-based teaching approaches for diverse learners. The study further supports the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) inclusive and equitable quality

education for all, by providing the disability-disaggregated evidence needed to track and accelerate progress toward this goal in Southeast Asia.

1.2 Research Objectives

General Objective

To identify barriers and effective practices influencing access to education and school re-entry for children with disabilities in selected ASEAN member states, namely Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines.

Specific Objectives

- To map systemic, attitudinal, and environmental barriers that hinder school access and re-entry for children with disabilities.
- To identify and document low-cost, scalable models and practices currently facilitating inclusive education and reintegration.
- To provide evidence-based recommendations for strengthening policy and implementation at national and regional levels.

1.3 Research Questions

- What are the primary systemic, attitudinal, and physical barriers that prevent children with disabilities from accessing or returning to school?
- Which existing practices or models have successfully promoted access, participation, and re-entry among out-of-school children with disabilities?
- How can these practices be adapted and scaled across different educational contexts within ASEAN?

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study makes several important contributions to the field. First, it provides specific evidence on OOSCY among learners with disabilities, a population that is consistently underrepresented in regional education research. Second, it adopts an ecological systems approach that captures the multi-level nature of educational exclusion rather than attributing it solely to individual characteristics. Third, it documents replicable, low-cost practices that have demonstrated effectiveness in resource-constrained settings across the three focus countries. Finally, the study contributes actionable, evidence-based recommendations to inform inclusive education policy and programming at national and regional levels.

1.5 Definition of Key Terms

Children and Youth with Disabilities: Individuals who experience long-term physical, sensory, intellectual, or psychosocial impairments. In accordance with the UNCRPD, disability is viewed as the result of the interaction between an individual's impairment and the environmental or attitudinal barriers that hinder their full participation in education (United Nations, 2006).

Out-of-School Children and Youth (OOSCY): Children and youth in one or more of the following situations: (1) those who do not have access to a school in their community; (2) those who do not enrol in school despite the availability of schooling; (3) those who enrol but do not attend regularly or are at risk of dropping out; and (4) those who have dropped out of the education system. This definition is adopted from the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Education for Out-of-School Children and Youth (ASEAN Secretariat, 2016).

Inclusive Education: A systemic approach to education that ensures all learners, regardless of disability, gender, or socio-economic status, can access and progress through responsive learning systems. It moves beyond 'integration' by requiring schools to adapt their environments and pedagogy to meet the student rather than requiring the student to change to fit the school (UNESCO, 2020).

Non-Formal and Alternative Education: Education programmes that provide learning opportunities outside the state-recognised formal school system. This includes Alternative Learning Systems (ALS), equivalency programmes, and community-based bridging programmes designed to transition OOSCY back into formal education or provide life skills (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2012).

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the existing literature regarding the exclusion of children and youth with disabilities from formal education systems in Southeast Asia. To navigate the complex interplay of factors contributing to this phenomenon, this study adopts the Ecological Systems Perspective as its theoretical framework. This approach moves beyond individual-centric models, mapping systemic and community-level barriers and enablers across nested layers of the environment.

2.2 Theoretical Framework: Ecological Systems Perspective

Originally developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), the Ecological Systems Perspective emphasises that human development is shaped through dynamic interactions among multiple, interrelated systems. In later iterations, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) introduced the Bioecological Model, highlighting proximal processes on the daily interactions within the microsystem, as the primary engines of development. In the context of this study, the perspective provides a holistic lens for examining how experiences, practices, and outcomes are influenced not only by individual characteristics, but also by factors operating across family, school, community, institutional, and policy levels. This approach aligns with the Social-Relational model of disability (Reindal, 2008), which frames exclusion not as an internal deficit but as a result of restricted participation within a particular environment.

Within this framework, a child's 'out-of-school' status is understood as an outcome of a maladaptive ecosystem. As noted by Kamenopoulou (2016), inclusive education research must move beyond a 'within-child' focus to examine how support mechanisms across systems may be misaligned. Barriers to schooling can emerge at multiple levels:

- Microsystem: Immediate environments such as family support, peer interactions, and school experiences.
- Mesosystem: Interactions between microsystems, for example, home-school communication and collaboration.
- Exosystem: Institutional and local administrative structures that indirectly influence access to resources.
- Macrosystem: Broader societal attitudes, cultural norms, and national policies that facilitate or restrict inclusion.
- Chronosystem: The dimension of time, including how transitions and historical changes shape educational experiences.

By applying this ecological lens, the study interprets themes of exclusion as products of systemic interactions rather than isolated individual deficits.

2.3 The Southeast Asian Educational Landscape for Learners with Disabilities

The Southeast Asian region is characterised by significant diversity in governance structures, economic development, and cultural contexts, all of which shape how inclusive education policies are translated into practice. While all three focus countries, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines have formal policy commitments to inclusive education, implementation remains uneven and context-specific.

Malaysia

Malaysia's approach to special and inclusive education is anchored in the Persons with Disabilities Act 2008 and the Zero Reject Policy (2019), which mandates that no child with a disability may be denied access to schooling. The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 further articulates ambitions for equitable, high-quality education. One of the education settings model for serving learners with disabilities is through the Programme Pendidikan Khas Integrasi (PPKI), which places special education classrooms within mainstream school compounds. While this enables some degree of social integration, academic inclusion remains limited by differences in learning pace, curriculum alignment, and teacher readiness. Transition pathways to technical and vocational education are supported through the Malaysian Skills Certificate (SKM) and community college programmes, though structured employment pathways remain underdeveloped.

Thailand

Thailand's National Education Act (1999) guarantees every citizen at least twelve years of quality education. The country has a tiered system that includes mainstream inclusive schools for learners with mild disabilities (particularly those with learning disabilities and high-functioning autism), as well as specialised schools such as Nakhon Ratchasima Panyanukul School, that serve students with more significant support needs. Thailand's governance structure is relatively decentralised, which means that the quality and availability of inclusive education vary considerably by region. Boarding arrangements are common for students in specialised schools serving geographically dispersed populations in northeastern Thailand. Early intervention infrastructure, particularly through government-funded special education centres, represents a notable systemic strength.

The Philippines

The Philippines enacted Republic Act 11650 (the Inclusive Education Act) in 2022, providing a strong legal mandate for disability-inclusive schooling. The DepEd implements inclusive education through Inclusive Learning Resource Centres (ILRCs) and a combination of self-contained SPED classrooms and supported integration into general education classes. Child Find programmes, conducted annually, are a notable feature of the Philippine system, involving community outreach to identify unenrolled children with disabilities. However, physical infrastructure gaps, insufficient numbers of trained SPED teachers, and logistical barriers in rural and remote areas continue to constrain effective implementation.

2.4 Ecological Mapping Across the Three Countries

The following table presents an ecological mapping of the policy and institutional environment across the three study countries, illustrating the systemic landscape within which OOSCY with disabilities are situated:

System Level	Malaysia	Thailand	Philippines
Macrosystem (National Laws & Policies)	Zero Reject Policy (2019); Persons with Disabilities Act 2008; Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025	National Education Act (1999): 12 years of free, quality basic education for all citizens	Republic Act 11650 (2022): Legal mandate for inclusive, accessible, quality education for learners with disabilities
Exosystem (Institutions & Governance)	Centralised governance via Ministry of Education; structured tri-setting framework (Special School, PPKI and Full Inclusive); district-level implementation varies	Provincial Education Offices; decentralised governance influences implementation disparities between urban and rural areas	Inclusive Learning Resource Centers (ILRCs); strong Local Government Unit involvement; mixed governance
Mesosystem (Connections & Networks)	Parent-Teacher Associations; high engagement but often focused on mainstream achievement; home visit protocols exist	Community-monastic links; involvement of local temples and NGOs; boarding school family arrangements	Family-school coordination affected by transport costs and informal support; community health unit partnerships
Microsystem (Immediate Environment)	PPKI classrooms within mainstream compounds; teacher-student interaction central; mixed ability groupings common	Mainstream classes for mild disabilities; specialised boarding schools for complex needs; high teacher-to-student ratios	Self-contained SPED classrooms; congested classrooms (40+:1 ratio); heavy reliance on family presence for support
Chronosystem (Time & Transitions)	Recent transition from segregated special schools to integrated mainstream settings; emerging TVET pathways	Post-2008 disability act evolution; long-term integration efforts; early intervention infrastructure strengthening	Transition from SPED centre model toward inclusive national system under RA 11650; child find programme expansion

Table 2.1: Ecological Mapping of Inclusive Education Systems Across Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines

The mapping reveals that while all three countries exhibit strong macro-level commitments to inclusive education, challenges arise at the meso- and micro-levels where policy intentions encounter practical realities. In Malaysia, structural rigidity at the school level constrains flexibility in meeting diverse learner needs. In Thailand, the decentralised governance model creates uneven access depending on geographic location. In the Philippines, despite strong legal protections under RA 11650, resource gaps and implementation challenges limit the reach of inclusion.

2.5 Barriers to Inclusive Education: A Review of the Literature

The literature identifies a range of intersecting barriers that contribute to educational exclusion among children and youth with disabilities in the region. These operate at multiple ecological levels:

Economic and Financial Barriers

Poverty is a primary driver of school non-participation among children with disabilities. Research consistently demonstrates that families experiencing economic hardship face compounded challenges in supporting the education of children with disabilities, who often require additional resources, such as assistive devices, transportation, therapeutic support, and specialised materials are beyond their means (UNICEF, 2021; UNESCO, 2020). In contexts where children are expected to contribute to family income, the perceived opportunity cost of schooling further compounds exclusion.

Attitudinal and Stigma-Related Barriers

Negative attitudes and deficit-oriented perceptions of disability within families, communities, and schools are pervasive barriers to educational inclusion across Southeast Asia. Some families deny or minimise their children's disabilities due to stigma, delaying identification and enrolment. Some parents reject formal assessments because a formal diagnosis may carry social consequences (Singal et al., 2020). At the school level, some general education teachers express reluctance to receive students with disabilities in their classrooms, citing lack of training and confidence.

Infrastructural and Environmental Barriers

Physical inaccessibility remains a significant structural barrier in many schools across the region. Limited availability of ramps, accessible toilets, and mobility aids disproportionately affects students with physical disabilities. Overcrowded classrooms, insufficient learning materials adapted for diverse learners, and a lack of assistive technologies compound these physical barriers. Geographic distance from schools is particularly acute in Thailand, where specialised schools serve students from multiple provinces, necessitating boarding arrangements.

Teacher Preparedness and Capacity Gaps

Limited teacher preparedness is a cross-cutting challenge across all three countries. Many general education teachers report insufficient training in inclusive pedagogies, behaviour management, differentiated instruction, and the use of Individualised Education Plans (IEPs). Teacher training programmes have historically not embedded inclusive education content, and professional development opportunities in this area remain sporadic and often inaccessible. The shortage of specialist support personnel such as teaching assistants, occupational therapists, and counsellors with disability expertise, further limits the capacity of schools to meet the diverse needs of their learners.

Policy Implementation Gaps

While all three countries have enacted legislation and policies that support inclusive education, implementation fidelity varies considerably. Fragmented coordination between education, health, and social welfare agencies limits the effectiveness of multi-sectoral approaches. Transition pathways from early intervention to schooling, and from schooling to employment, are often unclear or absent. Data systems for tracking OOSCY with disabilities are limited, making it difficult to monitor progress and target interventions effectively.

2.6 Enabling Factors and Scalable Practices in the Literature

Alongside these barriers, the literature identifies a range of enabling factors and scalable practices. Home-school partnerships facilitated through structured visitation programmes improve retention by enabling teachers to understand and respond to family circumstances (UNESCO, 2020). Peer support systems and mentoring programmes enhance the social inclusion of students with disabilities while building skills and motivation. Vocational and livelihood programmes that create visible pathways from school to employment are particularly effective in re-engaging older OOSCY with disabilities. Child-find and outreach programmes that proactively identify unenrolled children in communities have demonstrated measurable success in expanding enrolment. Positive reinforcement systems, such as token economies, have been shown to improve attendance in special education settings in the Southeast Asian context.

The literature also underscores the critical role of teacher attitude and agency. Teachers who possess positive attitudes toward inclusion, combined with access to practical strategies and supportive school leadership, are consistently identified as among the most powerful enablers of successful inclusive education (Ainscow & Miles, 2008).

2.7 Contribution to Knowledge and Practice

This study makes several distinct contributions to the existing body of knowledge on OOSCY with disabilities in Southeast Asia. First, it advances a disability-disaggregated analysis of OOSCY, a population that is systematically underrepresented in regional education research, which tends to focus on OOSCY as an undifferentiated group. By centring the specific experiences of children and youth with disabilities, the study surfaces barriers and enabling factors that remain invisible in broader analyses.

Second, the application of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Perspective as an organising framework offers an advance over single-level analyses of educational exclusion. By mapping barriers and enablers across micro, meso, exo, and macro levels simultaneously, and examining their interactions, the study provides a more complete and nuanced account of how exclusion is produced and maintained.

Third, the study documents and assesses the scalability of contextually grounded practices across three distinct national systems, contributing practical, replicable knowledge that is often absent from the academic literature. The focus on low-cost, teacher-led practices such as home visitation, peer mentoring, and token economies is particularly relevant to resource-constrained settings across Southeast Asia.

Fourth, the study contributes comparative evidence across Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines, three countries with contrasting governance structures and implementation models, enabling the identification of both universal challenges and system-specific solutions. This comparative perspective supports regional learning and policy dialogue within ASEAN.

Finally, by explicitly linking survey data from 84 practitioners with qualitative insights from six key informants and a policy document review, the study demonstrates an integrated mixed-methods approach that can serve as a model for future thematic research in inclusive education within the SEAMEO context.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Approach

This study adopts a mixed-methods, multiple case study design, consistent with its thematic and comparative objectives. The mixed-methods approach enables the integration of qualitative and quantitative evidence to provide a more comprehensive understanding of barriers and enabling factors influencing educational access for children and youth with disabilities. The multiple case study design allows for in-depth exploration across the three selected countries while preserving contextual specificity and supporting cross-case comparison to identify shared patterns, systemic differences, and transferable practices.

Guided by the ecological systems framework, the methodology captures interactions across multiple levels — individual, family, school, institutional, and policy systems. Each country is treated as a distinct case, while cross-case synthesis is conducted to identify convergent themes and context-specific variations.

3.2 Country Selection

The study focuses on Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines. These countries were selected based on the following criteria: (i) formal policy commitment to inclusive education; (ii) existing legislative or strategic frameworks addressing OOSCY and disability inclusion; and (iii) variation in governance structures, implementation models, and resource contexts. This purposeful selection enables comparative analysis across different education system structures and stages of inclusive education implementation within Southeast Asia.

3.3 Participants and Sampling

A total of six Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted (two per country) with special education teachers serving as key informants. In addition, the School Accessibility Checklist Survey was administered to 125 participants and received 84 completed responses (67.2% response rate) from school leaders, teachers, and administrators across the three countries. The KII participants were:

Country	Informant	Experience	Key Context
Malaysia	KII-MY-01 (Special Ed. Teacher)	~15 years	Vocational special education; industry attachment; SKM programmes
Malaysia	KII-MY-02 (Senior Teacher)	19 years	Learning disabilities; pastry vocational skills; PPKI
Thailand	KII-TH-01 (SPED Teacher)	5–6 years	Deaf and autism learners; boarding school
Thailand	KII-TH-02 (Occupational Therapist)	2 years	Government special education centre; early intervention; ASD; 300–400 children aged 0–11
Philippines	KII-PH-01 (SPED Teacher)	~15 years	Hearing impairment; licensed sign language interpreter

Philippines	KII-PH-02 (SPED Teacher)	16 years	Multiple disabilities (autism, CP, intellectual, visual impairment); inclusion readiness model

Table 3.1: Overview of Key Informant Interview Participants

Note: Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were planned in the original study design but could not be conducted due to logistical and institutional constraints. Accordingly, the qualitative component of this study is based entirely on KIIs with teachers. This represents a limitation that is acknowledged in Section 3.6.

3.4 Data Collection Methods

Document and Policy Review

A systematic review of national legislation, policy frameworks, strategic plans, and implementation guidelines was conducted to map institutional commitments and regulatory environments related to inclusive education and OOSCY across Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines. Documents reviewed include national disability laws, ministry of education policies, education blueprints, and relevant regional frameworks including ASEAN declarations and UNCRPD commitments.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

Semi-structured KIIs were conducted with six special education teachers, two from each country. Interview protocols were aligned with the ecological systems framework to ensure coverage across multiple levels of influence. Topics covered included: (a) the informant's professional background and school context; (b) current practices and levels of inclusion; (c) barriers experienced by OOSCY with disabilities at school, family, and system levels; (d) strategies used to improve attendance and retention; (e) identification and reintegration of OOSCY; and (f) recommendations for policy and practice. Interviews were conducted in English language, and were transcribed and translated where necessary.

School Accessibility Checklist Survey

A structured school accessibility checklist survey was administered to 125 participants across the three study countries. A total of 84 completed responses were received, representing a response rate of 67.2%. Respondents included school leaders, special education teachers, and general education teachers with direct knowledge of physical, instructional, and environmental accessibility conditions in their schools. The checklist assessed dimensions including: physical infrastructure accessibility (ramps, toilets, classroom mobility); availability of assistive learning materials and technologies; inclusive classroom practices; availability of specialist support services; and school-level systems for identifying, monitoring, and re-engaging OOSCY. Results from the survey are presented in Section 4.5 and are integrated throughout the qualitative findings to provide a quantitative complement to the KII data.

3.5 Data Analysis

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data from interviews and document reviews were analysed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework of Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarisation with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report. Coding was guided by the ecological systems framework, allowing findings to be organised according to system levels. Cross-case synthesis was conducted to identify common themes and context-specific variations.

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data from the accessibility checklists were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies and cross-tabulations. These analyses support identification of patterns across school settings and national contexts but are not intended for inferential generalisation given the sample size and purposive selection approach.

Mixed-Methods Integration

The integration of qualitative and quantitative data occurs at the interpretation stage, following what Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) describe as a convergent parallel design. Survey findings are presented alongside KII data within the findings chapter to allow for corroboration, elaboration, and where relevant, identification of divergence. Where survey data confirm patterns identified in the KIIs, this strengthens the credibility of the findings. Where discrepancies arise, these are noted and explored analytically. This integration strategy enhances both the validity and the depth of the study's conclusions.

3.6 Limitations

Several limitations should be noted in interpreting the findings of this study. First, the non-implementation of FGDs means that the qualitative dataset is entirely reliant on the perspectives of teachers, and does not incorporate the voices of policymakers, students with disabilities, caregivers, or DPO representatives as originally planned. The absence of student and caregiver voices is a meaningful limitation given that their lived experiences are central to understanding out-of-school status.

Second, the KII sample (n=6) is small and not statistically representative; findings are therefore intended as rich, contextualised insights rather than generalisable claims. The survey sample (n=84), while larger, was collected through purposive and convenience sampling via school networks in the three countries, which may introduce selection bias toward schools with relatively higher engagement with inclusive education, potentially underrepresenting the most under-resourced or excluded settings.

Third, all KII participants are teachers and therefore share a professional standpoint that may not fully capture system-level or family-level perspectives. The survey was similarly completed by school practitioners, limiting the range of stakeholder viewpoints represented.

Fourth, the survey instrument, while designed to be completed anonymously, relies on self-report, which may introduce social desirability bias, particularly for items related to policy implementation and institutional capacity, where respondents may be reluctant to report negatively on their own schools.

Fifth, language barriers and translation processes may have introduced minor inconsistencies in the qualitative data. Where interviews were conducted through English language, follow-up checking was undertaken by the research team, and while care was taken to preserve meaning, nuance may have been lost.

These limitations are transparent and inform the interpretive boundaries placed on the findings throughout this report. They also highlight priority areas for future research, including studies that explicitly centre student and caregiver perspectives, and that employ larger and more systematically representative samples.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The study adheres to established ethical standards for research involving children and vulnerable populations. Key ethical procedures include: (i) informed consent from adult KII participants prior to interviews; (ii) voluntary participation with the right to withdraw at any time; (iii) use of accessible and appropriate communication formats; (iv) safeguarding protocols to protect participants from harm; (v) confidentiality and secure data storage; and (vi) compliance with national Ministry of Education requirements in each study country.

For the School Accessibility Checklist Survey, participant information and consent statements were provided at the beginning of the survey instrument (see Annex B). The survey was fully anonymous with no individual or school was identified in the data. Respondents were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could exit the survey at any point without consequence. Survey data were stored securely and analysed in aggregated form only. These procedures ensured that the survey met the same ethical standards applied to the qualitative components of the study.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents the integrated findings of the study, drawing on qualitative data from six KIIs, documentary policy analysis, and school accessibility survey data. Findings are organised around four primary themes: (1) barriers to school access and participation; (2) barriers to re-entry and retention; (3) school-based strategies and enabling practices; and (4) systemic and policy-level insights. Where relevant, cross-country comparisons highlight convergences and divergences in experience across Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines.

4.1 Barriers to School Access and Participation

Analysis of the KII data reveals a multi-layered pointers of barriers that prevent children and youth with disabilities from accessing or maintaining participation in education. These barriers operate at individual, family, school, and system levels, and are mutually reinforcing rather than discrete.

4.1.1 Economic and Financial Barriers

Economic hardship emerged as a primary driver of school non-participation across all three countries. In Malaysia, informants described students working part-time in night markets and informal labour, missing school regularly due to the competing pressures of economic survival. KII-MY-02 described the situation plainly: 'The students need to work. They earn money at the night market, sometimes every night. By the morning they are too tired to come to school.' A related challenge is the misuse of student welfare allowances, where financial support intended for students is diverted for other household expenses, undermining students' wellbeing and school readiness.

In the Philippines, financial constraints affected families' ability to provide transportation allowances, school supplies, and other basic necessities. KII-PH-01 noted that 'some of our students live in different barangays and the transport cost alone stops families from sending their children regularly.' The Thai occupational therapist (KII-TH-02) noted that even where services were free, hidden costs such as significant time off work for required parental attendance, has created substantial economic burdens for low-income families, observing that 'working parents just cannot afford to take time off every session. So the child stops coming.'

These accounts are corroborated by the survey, in which poverty and financial hardship and transport difficulties were the two most frequently selected barriers to school access across all three countries, selected by the majority of the 84 respondents when asked to identify the most common barriers affecting their students.

MY	*In Malaysia, students working part-time (e.g., night markets, informal labour) to support family income leads to poor school attendance. Financial allowances intended for students are sometimes diverted by parents for other household expenses.*

PH	*In the Philippines, families struggle to provide transportation allowances and other schooling expenses. Students living across different barangays face significant logistical challenges in accessing school.*

TH *In Thailand, even free services create indirect economic burdens. The requirement for parental attendance at therapeutic sessions is a barrier for working parents and low-income families.*

4.1.2 Family-Related Barriers

Family environment and parental engagement emerged as critical factors across all three countries. In Malaysia, both informants highlighted issues including parental divorce, lack of parental supervision, and the inability of elderly guardians to support school attendance. Some parents were found to actively cover up students' absences rather than addressing the underlying causes, reflecting a normalisation of chronic absenteeism within certain family environments. A recurring observation was that parental engagement in special education tended to be low unless financial incentives were present.

In Thailand, school informants described students experiencing homesickness and emotional distress as a result of boarding school arrangements, as well as family-related vulnerabilities including parental alcohol abuse, physical abuse, and neglect. In the Philippines, a significant family-level barrier was parental denial of disability, leading to delays in assessment and enrolment. Some parents were reluctant to enrol their children in SPED programmes due to stigma, requiring teachers to engage in intensive one-on-one discussions to build trust and understanding.

4.1.3 Attitudinal and Stigma-Related Barriers

Negative attitudes toward disability within families, communities, and schools has emerged as a persistent cross-cutting barrier. In Malaysia, informants described some mainstream teachers as holding negative perceptions of students with disabilities, which affected the quality of inclusive interactions. KII-MY-02 noted that 'some mainstream teachers still see these students as a burden. They are not trained, so they don't know what to do.' In the Philippines, resistance from some general education teachers was attributed to limited experience and insufficient training. KII-PH-02 observed that 'some teachers simply do not know how to manage learners with disabilities in a large class. They are willing but they are not equipped.'

Parental stigma and denial were noted as particular challenges in the Philippine context. KII-PH-01 described working with families who had kept their children at home for years: 'Some parents do not want a diagnosis. They think it means something is wrong with the family. We have to build trust before they will even consider enrolling.' The survey similarly found that negative attitudes toward disability was among the barriers most frequently identified by respondents across all three countries, alongside poverty and transport.

4.1.4 Physical and Environmental Barriers

Physical accessibility in school environments varied across the three countries. In the Philippines, both informants highlighted limited wheelchair accessibility, insufficient ramps, and inadequate accessible toilets as barriers for students with physical disabilities. Overcrowded classrooms with ratios of 40 students or more to a single teacher, further limited the capacity of teachers to provide individualised support. In Thailand, geographical distance was a defining structural barrier, with the school studied serving students from four provinces across northeastern Thailand, requiring

approximately 80% of students to live in boarding facilities. In Malaysia, accessibility challenges were less prominently cited, though infrastructure gaps in older school buildings were acknowledged.

4.1.5 Health-Related Barriers

The health vulnerability of learners with disabilities was identified as a significant factor in irregular attendance across all countries. In the Philippines, informants noted that learners with disabilities frequently have weak immune systems, leading to extended absences due to illness. In Thailand, the occupational therapist reported that some children dropped out of therapeutic programmes due to medical conditions. These health-related absences, when they extend beyond defined thresholds, place students at heightened risk of formal dropout.

4.2 Barriers to Re-entry and Retention

Beyond initial access, the study reveals significant barriers to the retention of students with disabilities once enrolled, and to their re-entry once they have lapsed out of school.

4.2.1 Student Disengagement and Motivation

Lack of student motivation was cited by all informants across the three countries as a significant contributor to school dropout among students with disabilities. In Malaysia, the concept of 'malas' (laziness) was invoked by informants, though contextual analysis suggests this reflects not an intrinsic character trait but a response to learning environments that are not perceived as meaningful or relevant. The Malaysian informants emphasised that when students cannot see a connection between school activities and real-world outcomes, particularly the employment pathways, their engagement diminishes. Programmes that introduce practical, skills-based learning have been found to reverse this trend.

4.2.2 Curriculum Mismatch and Instructional Barriers

The mismatch between the curriculum in PPKI and SPED classrooms and that of mainstream classes was cited as a barrier to academic inclusion and progression in both Malaysia and the Philippines. In Malaysia, some parents insist on full academic inclusion for their children, even where the school assesses this to be inappropriate based on the student's functional level, leading to tension and, in some cases, unsuccessful placement experiences. Trial inclusion periods of up to three months are used in one Malaysian school to generate evidence on a student's classroom performance, behaviour, and peer interaction before a formal placement decision is made.

4.2.3 Absence of Structured Re-entry Pathways

A significant systemic gap identified across all three countries is the absence of formal, structured re-entry pathways for OOSCY with disabilities. In Malaysia, one informant confirmed that there is no formal reintegration programme; rather, students who return are assessed on an ad hoc basis and placed in lower-level classes to match their current functional level. Similarly, in Thailand's early intervention centre, students who are absent for more than three months are classified as dropout and undergo reassessment upon return, but without a structured reintegration

programme. In the Philippines, students re-entering school are provided with remediation classes and enrichment programmes, which represents a more developed re-entry mechanism compared to the other two countries.

4.2.4 Teacher Preparedness Gaps

Insufficient teacher preparedness was consistently identified as one of the most critical barriers to inclusive education. Across all three countries, informants highlighted that many teachers, both special educators and general education teachers are lacking sufficient training in inclusive teaching strategies, behaviour management, and the use of IEPs. KII-MY-01 noted that 'many teachers know what an RPI is on paper, but in practice they treat it as a form to fill in at the beginning of the year and then put in a drawer.' In Malaysia, IEPs (referred to as RPI) are widely acknowledged as an important tool, but many teachers treat them as administrative paperwork rather than as dynamic instructional guides.

In the Philippines, KII-PH-02 observed that 'teachers who trained before 2018 never had a single lecture on inclusive education in their teacher training. It simply was not there.' This reflects a systemic gap in pre-service preparation that continues to affect the capacity of schools to meet diverse learner needs. The survey corroborated this, with a substantial proportion of respondents disagreeing or remaining neutral on the statement that 'teachers receive adequate practical training' for inclusive education, one of the lowest-scoring items across Section D of the survey instrument. The shortage of support staff including teaching assistants, occupational therapists, and counsellors with expertise in disability compounds the challenge further.

4.3 School-Based Strategies and Enabling Practices

Despite the challenges described above, the study documents a rich repertoire of effective, contextually grounded strategies that educators across the three countries have developed to improve attendance, support re-entry, and promote inclusive participation. These practices are characterised by their low cost, relational approach, and responsiveness to local conditions.

4.3.1 Home Visitation Programmes

Structured home visitation programmes were a prominent feature of effective practice across all three countries. In Malaysia, the Ziarah Cakna (also referred to as 'Lawatan Kasih' in some schools) programme involves teachers visiting students' homes to understand family context, build relationships with parents, and provide counselling and encouragement. In Thailand, the 'Yeam Ban' programme similarly involves teachers visiting students' homes during school breaks to assess family needs, provide learning materials, and supply essential items such as nutritional supplements and school stationery. In the Philippines, home visitation was a standard strategy used to understand family circumstances and re-engage students who had dropped out.

The cross-country consistency of home visitation as an effective practice is notable. In each context, teachers described the importance of understanding the holistic family situation including economic stressors, parental capabilities, and home environment, as a precondition for effective support. These programmes were not merely welfare visits; they were relational investments that built the trust necessary for sustained school engagement.

Best Practice

Ziarah Cakna / Lawatan Kasih (MY) and Yeam Ban (TH): Structured home visit programmes that build teacher-family relationships, assess barriers to schooling, and provide direct material and emotional support. Both are low-cost, highly relational, and consistently cited as effective.

4.3.2 Peer Mentoring and Support Systems

Peer mentoring programmes represent a cost-effective and socially valuable strategy for supporting students with disabilities. In Malaysia, the 'Guru Muda' (Young Teacher) programme assigns higher-performing students to support peers with lower functional levels during learning activities and industry placements. This approach simultaneously builds the academic and social skills of both participants. A similar peer support mechanism was described in the Philippines, where more capable students assist those with higher support needs in classroom settings.

4.3.3 Positive Reinforcement Systems

Token economy systems whereby students earn points or stars for attendance, participation, and positive behaviour, which can be exchanged for rewards have demonstrated effectiveness in improving attendance among students with disabilities in Malaysia. One informant described a previous school achieving attendance rates above 90% through consistent implementation of a token economy system. This finding aligns with the behavioural literature on positive reinforcement for students with developmental disabilities. The practice is low-cost, easily adaptable, and does not require specialised training.

4.3.4 School-Based Livelihood and Vocational Projects

Practical, hands-on school-based projects that create meaningful engagement were identified as powerful retention tools in Malaysia. Projects including quail farming, ornamental fish breeding, school cafés and bakeries increased student attendance because students developed ownership and responsibility toward the projects. These initiatives position students as productive contributors rather than passive recipients, which appears to be particularly motivating for students with disabilities who may struggle with abstract academic content.

Building on this, the 'Hello School to Work' programme in Malaysia represents a more structured industry-linked approach, involving collaboration with employers through PERKESO to provide students with real-world job exposure, vocational training in hotels and workplaces, and employment placement pathways. This programme directly addresses the motivation challenge by making the relationship between schooling and future employment explicit and tangible.

4.3.5 Child Find and Community Mapping

The Philippines' Child Find programme stands out as a nationally implemented, systematic approach to identifying unenrolled children with disabilities. Conducted annually, the programme involves house-to-house visits in barangays, conducted in collaboration with local government officials, to locate children with disabilities who are not yet enrolled in school. In one example shared by an informant, five out-of-school learners were identified and successfully enrolled through this initiative. The programme represents a proactive outreach model that shifts the burden of access from families who may face multiple barriers to engagement, to the school system.

Best Practice *Child Find Programme (PH): Annual community-based outreach to identify unenrolled children with disabilities. Conducted house-to-house, in collaboration with local government units. Demonstrated success in bringing previously unenrolled children into school.*

4.3.6 Differentiated Instruction and Universal Design for Learning

Across all three countries, effective teachers described using differentiated instruction, adapted materials, and UDL principles to meet the diverse needs of their students. In Malaysia, teachers reported using student profiling and observation-based assessment to guide lesson design, and integrating hands-on learning activities, videos, digital tools, and visual step-by-step instructions to support independent learning. In the Philippines, teachers developed locally made assistive devices using inexpensive materials, and introduced typical learners to basic sign language to promote peer interaction with students who have hearing impairments. In Thailand, the use of interactive boards, projectors, and visual display screens was described as particularly valuable in supporting the learning of deaf students.

4.3.7 Flexible Transition and Alternative Pathways

Recognising that not all students with disabilities will progress through the standard academic pathway, informants in Malaysia described flexible transition options including early transfer to skills training colleges (SKM) for students aged sixteen and above. Rather than being seen as 'dropping out', these transitions were framed as redirecting students to more appropriate and motivating learning environments.

In the Philippines, the Alternative Learning System for Special Needs Education and Disability (ALS-SNED), also referred to as Expanded ALS, offers a critical non-formal pathway for learners with disabilities who are unable to access or sustain participation in formal schooling. The programme adapts ALS materials and instructional approaches for learners with disabilities, providing modified learning materials and small-group or individualised instruction to meet diverse needs. This represents one of the more developed alternative pathway systems in the region.

In Thailand, Community Learning Centres (CLCs) and Mobile School or Alternative Provision models deliver learning in community spaces and offer flexible certification pathways for vulnerable youth, including those with disabilities. These community-based models reduce the access barriers associated with centralised school settings and are particularly relevant for students in rural and remote areas. Additionally, the early intervention centre described a structured transition pathway whereby children are prepared for integration into mainstream inclusive schools around age seven, with follow-up visits to receiving schools to support teachers and monitor students' adjustment. This alumni follow-up model was identified by the Thai occupational therapist as a particularly effective and scalable practice for reducing post-transition dropout.

Best Practice *ALS-SNED / Expanded ALS (PH): Adapts the Alternative Learning System for learners with disabilities offers modified materials, flexible scheduling, and*

individualised instruction. Community Learning Centres (TH) similarly bring flexible learning into community spaces for hard-to-reach youth.

4.4 Systemic and Policy-Level Insights

4.4.1 The Role of Teacher Attitude and Agency

A consistent and striking pattern across all six interviews is the extent to which positive outcomes for students with disabilities are driven by individual teacher initiative rather than systemic structures. In Malaysia, KII-MY-02 drew a direct contrast: 'Some teachers will do anything for their students. They visit homes, they design activities, and they find solutions. Others wait to be told what to do. The difference is not training. It is attitude.' This observation was mirrored across the Philippines and Thailand, where informants described going beyond their formal job descriptions to ensure students remained in school.

KII-TH-01 reflected on the demands placed on individual educators: 'We do home visits, we bring supplies, we counsel the parents, and all of this is not in our official role, but if we don't do it, no one else will.' KII-PH-01 similarly noted that 'when the system doesn't have a structure for this, the teacher becomes the structure.' These accounts reveal both the remarkable commitment of individual practitioners and the fragility of a system that depends on exceptional individuals rather than institutional mechanisms. Survey data reinforce this as well, respondents broadly indicated that inclusive teaching efforts were present (Section C, high frequency ratings), while simultaneously reporting low agreement that sufficient budget, specialist support, and assistive resources were available (Section D).

4.4.2 Institutional Support Gaps

Despite the existence of policies and SOPs for monitoring attendance, conducting home visits, and supporting reintegration, informants across all three countries described significant gaps in implementation. In Malaysia, inconsistent follow-through on home visits and limited counsellor expertise in working with students with disabilities were cited. In Thailand, the occupational therapist observed that mainstream teachers in inclusive schools often lack the specific strategies needed to support students with complex disabilities. In the Philippines, the small number of SPED teachers are irrelative to the number of students requiring specialised support creates a structural capacity deficit that cannot be resolved through individual effort alone.

4.4.3 Transition Pathway Gaps

A critical cross-country finding is the lack of clear, structured pathways for students with disabilities beyond school. In Malaysia, one informant explicitly called for life-course pathway systems similar to those operating in Japan, where education, vocational training, employment, and long-term support are clearly mapped across the lifespan. Without such systems, schools rely on individual teacher initiative to connect students with post-school opportunities. The modular certification system in Malaysia was identified as a limitation, as partial skill certificates may not be recognised by employers, undermining the labour market value of vocational programmes. In the Philippines, the establishment of livelihood training centres for students aged fourteen and above was recommended as a step toward more structured transition support.

4.4.4 Multi-Sector Coordination

The findings highlight the importance of coordination across education, health, and social welfare sectors for effective inclusive education. In the Philippines, collaboration between schools and Local Government Units, barangay health centres, and universities providing therapy services demonstrates how multi-sector partnerships can extend the reach of school-based support. In Thailand, the multidisciplinary team at the early intervention centre comprising occupational therapists, physical therapists, and psychologists, enables a holistic intervention that single-agency school provision cannot match. In Malaysia, existing frameworks for collaboration with social welfare and vocational training agencies exist but are inconsistently activated at the school level.

4.5 School Accessibility Survey Findings

This section presents findings from the School Accessibility Checklist Survey (n=84 respondents from 125 administered; 67.2% response rate) administered across schools in Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines. The survey instrument comprised seven sections: (A) Respondent Information, (B) Physical Accessibility in School, (C) Teaching and Learning Practices, (D) Support and Resources, (E) Family and Community Engagement, (F) Barriers to Access and Re-entry, and (G) Open-Ended Responses (full instrument at Annex B). Sections B–E used 5-point Likert-type scales; Section F used multiple-choice and ranking items; Section G captured open qualitative responses. Findings are summarised descriptively. Five overarching themes emerged from the analysis, each directly corroborated by the KII data.

4.5.1 Policy–Practice Gap

Survey findings reveal a consistent disconnect between national policy commitments to inclusive education and actual school-level implementation. While respondents across all three countries indicated awareness of national legislation and disability inclusion frameworks, a substantial proportion reported that policy requirements were only partially translated into classroom practice. Common gaps identified included the inconsistent use of IEPs, irregular implementation of home visitation protocols, and the absence of structured re-entry pathways for students who had lapsed out of school. This pattern confirms the KII evidence of strong macro-level commitment alongside meso- and micro-level implementation deficits.

Policy Area	Survey Indication
Awareness of national inclusive education policy	High across all three countries
IEP / RPI consistently implemented	Partial reported as administrative rather than instructional tool
Structured attendance monitoring systems in place	Present in policy; inconsistently applied at school level
Formal re-entry pathway for OOSCY with disabilities	Largely absent; ad hoc arrangements predominate
District-level support for inclusive education	Reported as insufficient or irregular

Table 4.1: Survey Findings — Policy–Practice Gap (n=84)

4.5.2 Rural–Urban Divide

Geographic location emerged as a significant structural determinant of accessibility and resource availability. Respondents from rural and semi-rural schools consistently reported lower availability of accessible infrastructure, assistive technologies, specialist support staff, and professional development opportunities compared to their urban counterparts. In Thailand, this divide is particularly pronounced given the decentralised governance model, where provincial education offices vary substantially in their capacity to support inclusive education. In the Philippines, rural schools reported greater reliance on community-based informal support arrangements due to limited government resources. This rural-urban structural inequality compounds the barriers already faced by OOSCY with disabilities in remote and semi-urban communities.

4.5.3 Poverty and Transport as the Highest Barriers

Economic hardship and mobility constraints were identified by the largest proportion of survey respondents as the primary drivers of educational exclusion for children and youth with disabilities. When respondents were asked to rank the barriers most commonly affecting their students' attendance, poverty-related factors (insufficient family income, inability to cover school-related costs) and transportation difficulties (distance from school, cost of travel, lack of accessible transport) consistently ranked first and second across all three countries. This finding directly corroborates the KII qualitative evidence and underscores the structural nature of these barriers, as they cannot be addressed through school-level interventions alone, but require social protection and transport policy responses.

4.5.4 Teachers Ready, Systems Not Fully Ready

A notable and somewhat counterintuitive finding from the survey is the relative strength of teacher willingness and inclusive teaching effort in contrast to the weakness of systemic support structures. Survey respondents indicated that inclusive teaching efforts and positive teacher attitudes toward students with disabilities were broadly present across schools in all three countries. However, these individual efforts were consistently undermined by: limited budget allocation for inclusive education materials and assistive technologies; insufficient access to specialist support personnel; and inadequate professional development provision. This finding reinforces the KII evidence of teacher agency as a critical enabling factor while simultaneously highlighting the systemic fragility that renders that agency unsustainable at scale.

Survey Finding	*Teacher willingness to support inclusive education is broadly present, however it is consistently undermined by budget constraints, lack of specialist support, and limited professional development. Individual teacher effort cannot substitute for systemic infrastructure.*

4.5.5 Institutional Capacity as the Weakest Link

Survey data reveal that institutional and administrative capacity is the most consistently underdeveloped dimension of inclusive education systems across all three countries. Specific gaps identified include: underdeveloped systems for identifying and tracking OOSCY with disabilities; limited administrative capacity at district and school level to coordinate re-entry and reintegration; absence of systematic data collection on school accessibility compliance; and weak case management systems for students at risk of dropout. These institutional deficits mean that even where individual school practices are effective, they are rarely systematised, monitored, or scaled. The findings underscore that administrative support and re-entry systems for OOSCY with disabilities remain the most critical and least developed dimension of inclusive education in the three study countries.

#	Theme	Key Survey Finding	Policy Implication
1	**Policy–Practice Gap**	Strong national commitment; uneven school-level implementation	Strengthen district-level monitoring and compliance support

2	**Rural–Urban Divide**	Location significantly shapes accessibility, resource availability, and quality of support	Targeted rural grants, mobile support teams, and equitable resource distribution
3	**Poverty + Transport = Highest Barriers**	Economic hardship and mobility constraints are the primary drivers of exclusion	Integrate inclusive education with social protection; provide transport subsidies
4	**Teachers Ready, Systems Not Fully Ready**	Inclusive teaching efforts present, but limited budget, specialist support, and assistive resources	Shift from stand-alone training to system-supported implementation with paired resources
5	**Institutional Capacity Is the Weakest Link**	Administrative support and re-entry systems for OOSCY remain underdeveloped	Formalise OOSCY re-entry systems; establish structured case conferencing and bridging pathways

Table 4.2: Summary of School Accessibility Survey Key Findings (n=84)

4.6 Areas Requiring Deeper Analysis

The survey findings and KII data together identify six areas that require deeper investigation in future phases of this research and in subsequent policy development processes:

#	Area	Why It Requires Deeper Analysis
1	**Policy–Practice Implementation Gap**	Survey and KII data confirm the gap exists, but the mechanisms driving inconsistent implementation whether governance, resourcing, or capacity would require more granular investigation at district and school levels.
2	**Rural–Urban Structural Inequality**	Preliminary data indicate significant disparities but do not capture the full extent of geographic variation within countries, particularly in Thailand's decentralised system and the Philippines' archipelagic geography.
3	**Institutional Capacity**	The survey identifies institutional capacity as the weakest link but does not yet quantify the specific administrative gaps or map the capacity-building pathways that would be most effective.
4	**Poverty–Disability Interaction**	The compounding effect of poverty and disability on school exclusion is clear, but the study has not yet disaggregated findings by disability type, household income level, or geographic location to understand differential impacts.
5	**Re-entry and Transition Mechanisms for OOSCY**	Re-entry is an acknowledged gap across all three countries, but existing informal practices and their relative effectiveness have not been systematically documented or evaluated.
6	**Teacher Preparedness vs System Readiness**	The tension between teacher willingness and system insufficiency is a recurring finding, but the specific training content, delivery modalities, and system conditions that would most effectively close this gap require further study.

Table 4.3: Areas Requiring Deeper Analysis

Chapter 5: Cross-Country Analysis

This chapter synthesises the findings across Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines, identifying shared patterns, notable differences, and transferable insights. The cross-country comparison is structured around the study's three primary research questions.

5.1 Shared Barriers Across the Three Countries

Several barriers emerge with remarkable consistency across all three countries, suggesting that they reflect structural features of inclusive education systems in Southeast Asia rather than context-specific phenomena:

- Economic pressure and poverty as primary drivers of non-attendance and dropout among students with disabilities.
- Insufficient teacher preparedness particularly among general education teachers in inclusive pedagogies and disability-specific support.
- Absence of structured re-entry pathways for students who have lapsed out of school.
- Limited availability of support personnel, including teaching assistants, counsellors with disability expertise, and therapists.
- Physical inaccessibility of school environments, particularly for students with mobility impairments.
- The heavy dependence on individual teacher initiative to sustain inclusive practices in the absence of systemic support.

5.2 Context-Specific Features and Differences

Dimension	Malaysia	Thailand	Philippines
Primary barrier type	Economic pressure; family instability; motivation gaps	Geographic distance; boarding school challenges; parental attendance requirements	Financial constraints; transportation; parental denial and stigma
Key dropout drivers	Part-time work competing with schooling; parental disengagement	Homesickness in boarding; family dysfunction	Poverty; logistical barriers; health vulnerability
Re-entry mechanisms	Ad hoc placement in lower-level classes; no formal programme	Reassessment on return; no structured reintegration	Remediation classes; enrichment programmes (most developed)
Standout practices	Hello School to Work; token economy; school enterprises; Ziarah Cakna home visits; Early Identification & Attendance Monitoring	Yeam Ban home visits; alumni follow-up; home-based therapy; Mobile School/Alternative Provision; Community Learning Centres (CLC)	Child Find programme; ALS-SNED/Expanded ALS; Project Embrace; parent education; sports engagement
Transition pathways	TVET through SKM; community colleges; early transfer from age 16; emerging but fragmented	Structured early intervention-to-school transition; follow-up support; CLC flexible certification	ALS-SNED; livelihood training planned; ILRC under development; Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships

Teacher training	Mixed; attitudinal readiness as central determinant	Continuing professional development through MoE; sign language training	Pre-2018 gap in inclusive education training; INSET sessions underway

Table 5.1: Cross-Country Comparison of Barriers, Practices, and Systemic Features

5.3 Transferable Practices Across Country Contexts

Based on the cross-country analysis, the following practices are identified as having strong potential for transferability and scale across different national contexts within Southeast Asia:

Practice	Description	Country of Origin	Scalability
Structured Home Visitation	Systematic teacher visits to students' homes to build family relationships, identify barriers, and provide targeted support.	Malaysia (Ziarah Cakna / Lawatan Kasih); Thailand (Yeam Ban)	High — already adopted in multiple countries
Child Find / Community Mapping	Annual community outreach to identify unenrolled children with disabilities, conducted with LGU collaboration.	Philippines	High — adaptable with local government partnerships
Token Economy (Positive Reinforcement)	Reward-based attendance and participation system where students earn points redeemable for tangible rewards.	Malaysia	High — low-cost, minimal training required
Peer Mentoring (Guru Muda)	Higher-functioning students systematically support peers with lower functional levels during learning activities.	Malaysia; Philippines	High — leverages existing student capacity
School-Based Livelihood Projects	Practical projects (farming, food production, school enterprise) that create ownership, responsibility, and visible pathways to employment.	Malaysia	Moderate-High — requires school space and coordination
Industry-Linked Vocational Training	Formal partnerships with employers for workplace exposure, industry attachment, and employment placement.	Malaysia (Hello School to Work)	Moderate — requires industry engagement
Post-Transition Follow-Up	Centre staff visit receiving inclusive schools to monitor students' adjustment and support teachers after transition.	Thailand	High — replicable within existing school visit structures
Home-Based Intervention Programmes	Structured therapy and learning activities provided to parents for implementation at home during student absences.	Thailand	High — especially relevant for students with health conditions
ALS-SNED / Expanded ALS	Adapts the national Alternative Learning System for learners with disabilities; provides modified materials, small-group/individualised instruction, and flexible progression.	Philippines	High — adaptable to other countries with existing ALS or NFE systems

Community Learning Centres (CLC) / Mobile School	Learning delivered in community spaces with flexible certification pathways; reduces barriers of centralised school settings for hard-to-reach youth.	Thailand	Moderate-High — requires local community partnerships and facilitator capacity
Early Identification & Attendance Monitoring	Systematic flagging of students at risk of dropping out, paired with early counselling, parent engagement, and flexible support arrangements.	Malaysia	High — low-cost system that can be embedded in existing school monitoring structures

Table 5.2: Scalable Inclusion Practices and Transferability Assessment

Chapter 6: Recommendations and Conclusion

6.1 Recommendations

Drawing on the convergent findings from the School Accessibility Survey (n=84), the six Key Informant Interviews, and the document and policy review, this study presents evidence-based recommendations for national governments, education ministries, and regional stakeholders. Recommendations are organised around five strategic priorities that emerged consistently across all data sources, and are mapped to the key stakeholders responsible for action. Each recommendation is directly grounded in evidence presented in Chapters 4 and 5.

6.1.1 Strengthen Institutional Capacity

Grounded in: Section 4.5.5 (Institutional Capacity as the Weakest Link); Section 4.4.2 (Institutional Support Gaps); Section 4.2.3 (Absence of Structured Re-entry Pathways). Survey findings identified institutional capacity as the weakest link in inclusive education systems across all three countries, with administrative re-entry systems consistently underdeveloped. Strengthening this capacity requires action at multiple levels. At the district level, support structures, monitoring systems, and budget allocation mechanisms for inclusive education must be formalised and adequately resourced. Schools need structured case management systems to identify students at risk, coordinate multi-agency support, and track outcomes.

- Improve district-level support, dedicated funding lines, and monitoring systems for inclusive education.
- Establish structured case conferencing protocols for students at risk of dropout.
- Develop and fund district-level coordinator roles for OOSCY with disabilities.
- Create school-based data systems to track enrolment, attendance, and re-entry outcomes disaggregated by disability type.

6.1.2 Formalise OOSCY Re-entry Systems

Grounded in: Section 4.2.3 (Absence of Structured Re-entry Pathways); Section 4.5.1 (Policy–Practice Gap); Section 5.1 (Shared Barriers). The absence of formal, structured re-entry pathways for students with disabilities who have lapsed out of school is one of the most critical gaps identified in this study. Across Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines, re-entry relies on individual teacher initiative rather than institutional systems. Formalising these pathways is essential to converting isolated good practice into a reliable system. Re-entry mechanisms should include staged bridging programmes, assessment-based placement, and sustained pastoral support.

- Establish national guidelines for OOSCY re-entry procedures, including standardised assessment, placement, and monitoring protocols.
- Develop structured bridging and catch-up programmes specifically designed for learners with disabilities returning to school.
- Introduce formal case conferencing between schools, families, and support agencies when students re-enrol.
- Scale the Philippines' remediation and enrichment model as a regional reference point for re-entry support.

6.1.3 Shift from Stand-Alone Training to System-Supported Implementation

Grounded in: Section 4.5.4 (Teachers Ready, Systems Not Fully Ready); Section 4.2.4 (Teacher Preparedness Gaps); Section 4.4.1 (Role of Teacher Attitude and Agency). Survey findings consistently showed that teachers are willing and making inclusive education efforts, but that these efforts are unsupported by adequate resources, tools, and structural backing. The current approach where teachers attend isolated training workshops without follow-up support, resources, or enabling school environments is insufficient for sustained change. Professional development must be paired with the provision of assistive resources, collaborative school structures, and ongoing mentoring.

- Embed inclusive education across all pre-service teacher education programmes, for both general and special education teachers.
- Pair in-service professional development with the provision of assistive learning resources, teaching guides, and specialist consultation support.
- Establish Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) within and across schools to sustain peer support for inclusive practice.
- Introduce school-level inclusion champions or mentors who provide ongoing support to colleagues rather than relying solely on external training events.

6.1.4 Reduce Rural–Urban Inequality

Grounded in: Section 4.5.2 (Rural–Urban Divide); Section 4.1.4 (Physical and Environmental Barriers); Section 5.2 (Context-Specific Features). Geographic location is a structural determinant of access to inclusive education across all three countries, with rural and remote schools consistently disadvantaged in terms of specialist staffing, accessible infrastructure, assistive technologies, and professional development opportunities. Targeted policy responses are required to address this structural inequality, including resource redistribution mechanisms, mobile support services, and community-based models of learning.

- Introduce targeted rural grants and resource packages for schools in remote and peri-urban areas serving students with disabilities.
- Deploy mobile specialist support teams including trained special education advisors, occupational therapists, and accessibility assessors to rural schools on a scheduled basis.
- Scale Community Learning Centres (CLC) and mobile school models (as in Thailand) as flexible delivery mechanisms for hard-to-reach OOSCY in rural contexts.
- Prioritise rural schools in infrastructure accessibility upgrade programmes.

6.1.5 Address Poverty–Transport Barriers

Grounded in: Section 4.5.3 (Poverty + Transport = Highest Barriers); Section 4.1.1 (Economic and Financial Barriers); Section 5.1 (Shared Barriers). Poverty and transportation difficulties are consistently the highest-ranked barriers to school participation among students with disabilities across all three countries. These barriers cannot be resolved through school-level interventions alone; they require coordinated action at the intersection of education, social protection, and transport policy. Integrating inclusive education with existing social protection schemes provides the most cost-effective pathway to addressing economic and mobility barriers at scale.

- Integrate inclusive education support that includes school feeding, transport subsidies, and assistive device provision into national social protection programmes.
- Provide dedicated transport subsidies or school transport arrangements for students with disabilities, particularly in rural areas and for those attending specialised schools.
- Expand the reach of school feeding and basic needs support programmes to all students with disabilities, including those in special and integrated education settings.
- Work with Social Welfare and Transport Agencies to create cross-sector support packages for families of OOSCY with disabilities.

Key Stakeholder	Primary Role in Implementation
Ministries of Education	Lead policy development, curriculum reform, teacher education reform, and resource allocation for inclusive education.
District / Provincial Education Offices	Coordinate school-level implementation, monitor compliance, provide specialist support, and manage re-entry systems.
Social Welfare & Transport Agencies	Co-develop cross-sector support packages; provide transport subsidies and social protection integration for OOSCY families.
School Leaders & Teachers	Implement inclusive practices, conduct home visits, manage IEPs, and act as first responders for at-risk students.
NGOs & Disabled Persons' Organisations (DPOs)	Conduct community outreach, advocate for rights-based approaches, and support families and OOSCY in navigating education systems.
Local Government Units (LGU)	Facilitate child find and community mapping; provide local funding and infrastructure support; bridge school-community connections.

Table 6.1: Key Stakeholders and Their Roles in Advancing Inclusive Education for OOSCY with Disabilities

6.2 Conclusion

This study has examined the systemic and community-level challenges facing out-of-school children and youth with disabilities in Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines, and documented a range of scalable inclusion practices that have demonstrated effectiveness in these contexts. The findings reveal that educational exclusion among students with disabilities is rarely attributable to a single cause; rather, it emerges from the intersection of economic pressures, family vulnerabilities, attitudinal barriers, environmental inaccessibility, and systemic gaps in teacher preparedness and policy implementation.

At the same time, the study documents remarkable examples of educator creativity, relational investment, and practical innovation that have improved outcomes for students who might otherwise remain permanently out of school. Home visitation programmes, child find initiatives, peer mentoring, token economies, school-based livelihood projects, and structured transition support are among the practices that are already making a difference in classrooms and communities across the three study countries.

These findings carry important implications for regional policy and practice. The convergence of barriers across the three countries suggests that systemic solutions rather than individual or school-level fixes are required to achieve meaningful change at scale. The divergence in practice

and institutional context across Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines, however, reminds us that such solutions must be contextually adapted rather than transplanted wholesale.

SEAMEO SEN, in its role as the regional centre for special educational needs, is uniquely positioned to support the cross-country learning and policy dialogue that these findings call for. By facilitating the documentation, adaptation, and scaling of evidence-based inclusive practices across Southeast Asia, and by advocating for the systemic changes necessary to move from individual teacher heroism to institutional support, SEAMEO SEN are determined to channel the help to ensure that every child regardless of disability has an equitable opportunity to access and thrive in education.

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Annex A: Key Informant Interview Protocol

The following semi-structured interview protocol was used for all six Key Informant Interviews conducted in this study. The protocol was adapted to the national context where necessary.

Section A: Background and Context

- Could you please describe your current role and how long you have been working in special or inclusive education?
- What types of disabilities do the learners you work with primarily have?
- How would you describe the current level of inclusion in your school or centre?

Section B: Identifying OOSCY with Disabilities

- How does your school identify children with disabilities who are not enrolled or who have dropped out?
- In your experience, what are the main reasons why children with disabilities are out of school or at risk of dropping out?
- Are there particular groups of students with disabilities who you find are at highest risk of becoming out-of-school?

Section C: Barriers to Access and Retention

- What are the main financial or economic barriers that affect attendance and participation for students with disabilities?
- What family-related factors do you find contribute most to poor attendance or dropout?
- What school-level barriers — including teacher preparedness, physical environment, and resources — affect inclusion?
- How do attitudes toward disability — within the family, community, or school — affect students' school participation?

Section D: Strategies and Practices

- What strategies do you or your school use to improve attendance and prevent dropout among students with disabilities?
- How do you support students who have been out of school to return and re-engage?
- Are there any specific programmes or initiatives at your school that you believe are particularly effective? Could you describe them?
- What do you think makes these strategies work? What conditions are necessary for success?

Section E: Systemic and Policy Insights

- What support do you receive from the school leadership, district, and ministry level?
- What policy or systemic changes would most improve educational access and retention for students with disabilities in your context?

- Are there practices from your school that you believe could be replicated or scaled in other schools or countries?
- What would you like policymakers to understand about the daily realities of inclusive education in your school?

Annex B: School Accessibility Checklist Survey Instrument

The instrument comprises seven sections: respondent information, physical accessibility, teaching and learning practices, support and resources, family and community engagement, barriers to access and re-entry, and open-ended responses.

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION AND CONSENT

You are invited to participate in a research study examining school accessibility and support systems affecting out-of-school children and youth (OOSCY) with disabilities in Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines. This study aims to identify key challenges and effective practices at school and community levels that influence access to education and re-entry for learners with disabilities.

Participation involves completing a short survey (approximately 15-20 minutes). Your responses will remain confidential and will be analysed in aggregated form only. No individual or school will be identified in any reports.

Your participation is voluntary and you may exit the survey at any time without consequence. The survey is anonymous.

SECTION A: Respondent Information

No.	Question / Item	Response Options
A1	Country	Malaysia | Thailand | Philippines
A2	School Location	Rural | Semi-Urban | Urban
A3	School Type	Mainstream (inclusive classrooms) | Integrated SPED class | Special education school | Alternative / non-formal programme
A4	Role	Special education teacher | School leader | General education teacher | Occupational therapist / specialist
A5	Average class size in your classroom	Open-ended (number)

SECTION B: Physical Accessibility in School

Rate the availability of the following physical features in your school: 1 = Not available | 2 = Very limited | 3 = Partially available | 4 = Mostly available | 5 = Fully available

No.	Item	1	2	3	4	5
B1	Ramp access to classrooms	○	○	○	○	○
B2	Accessible toilets	○	○	○	○	○
B3	Adequate classroom space for mobility	○	○	○	○	○
B4	Proper lighting for learners with low vision	○	○	○	○	○
B5	Clear visual signage throughout the school	○	○	○	○	○

SECTION C: Teaching and Learning Practices

Rate how frequently the following are practised in your classroom: 1 = Never | 2 = Rarely | 3 = Sometimes | 4 = Often | 5 = Always

No.	Item	1	2	3	4	5
C1	Differentiated instruction is used based on students' abilities	○	○	○	○	○
C2	Individual Education Plans (IEP) are actively implemented in daily teaching	○	○	○	○	○
C3	Assessment methods are adapted to meet diverse learner needs	○	○	○	○	○
C4	Peer support / buddy systems are used to promote inclusion	○	○	○	○	○
C5	Flexible seating or grouping arrangements are provided	○	○	○	○	○

SECTION D: Support and Resources

Rate your level of agreement with the following statements: 1 = Strongly Disagree | 2 = Disagree | 3 = Neutral | 4 = Agree | 5 = Strongly Agree

No.	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
D1	The school has a clear and communicated inclusion policy	○	○	○	○	○
D2	There is sufficient budget allocated for inclusive education practices	○	○	○	○	○
D3	Teachers receive adequate practical training for inclusive education	○	○	○	○	○
D4	Specialist services (e.g., OT, speech therapy) are accessible when needed	○	○	○	○	○
D5	Assistive devices and adapted learning materials are available when required	○	○	○	○	○

SECTION E: Family and Community Engagement

Rate your level of agreement with the following statements: 1 = Strongly Disagree | 2 = Disagree | 3 = Neutral | 4 = Agree | 5 = Strongly Agree

No.	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
E1	The school communicates regularly with caregivers of learners with disabilities	○	○	○	○	○
E2	Case meetings or review sessions are held for learners at risk of dropout	○	○	○	○	○
E3	The school collaborates with NGOs, DPOs, or community organisations	○	○	○	○	○
E4	Transport support mechanisms or arrangements exist for learners with disabilities	○	○	○	○	○

SECTION F: Barriers to Access and Re-entry

No.	Question / Item
F1	In your experience, what are the most common barriers affecting school access or re-entry for learners with disabilities? (Select up to three)

	☐ Poverty / financial hardship ☐ Transport difficulties ☐ Overcrowded classrooms ☐ Lack of specialist support ☐ Caregiver resistance or denial of disability ☐ Lack of documentation ☐ Health-related issues ☐ Negative attitudes toward disability
F2	Which support mechanisms are available in your school for learners returning to school after a period of absence? (Select all that apply) ☐ Bridging programme ☐ Remedial / catch-up support ☐ Flexible timetable ☐ Case management system ☐ Peer mentoring ☐ Home visitation ☐ None
F3	Does your school have a formal, written protocol or procedure specifically for re-enrolling or re-integrating OOSCY with disabilities who have been absent for an extended period? ☐ Yes, we have a written and implemented protocol ☐ Yes, informally but it is not documented ☐ No formal protocol exists; re-entry is handled case-by-case ☐ I am not aware of any protocol

SECTION G: Open-Ended Responses

No.	Question
G1	What is the biggest challenge in supporting OOSCY with disabilities in your school context? (Open-ended)
G2	What support or resource would most improve inclusive access and re-entry for OOSCY with disabilities in your school? (Open-ended)